RISE OF THE FAR RIGHT

The far right has gained unprecedented popularity in Scandinavia shattering our self-image as a liberal and tolerant society. How did we get here?

By **Per Svensson** Illustration by **Johan Askegård**

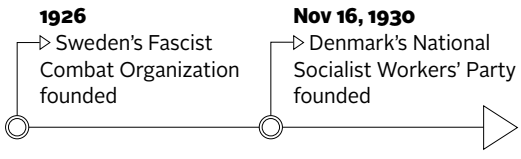


Photo by **Tomas Oneborg / Svd / TT**

Björn Söder, Sweden Democrat and second deputy speaker of the Swedish parliament

Björn Söder, secretary of the Sweden Democrats, attended the opening of the Swedish parliament in late September in a red waistcoat and black hat. He wasn't the only one in folk dress. Magdalena Andersson (Social Democratic Party), Åsa Romson (Green Party), and Rossana Dinamarca (Left Party) also wore traditional costumes to make a subtle point: the Sweden Democrats don't get to define what is Swedish.

The day before, when the newly elected MPs had gathered to elect the parliamentary speakers, the dissociation was much clearer. Dinamarca wore a T-shirt that said "SD=racists."

Söder was elected second deputy speaker – a role conventionally given to the third-largest party in the Swedish parliament, now the Sweden Democrats. This time, though, the other parties' MPs repeatedly abstained from voting – a highly unusual demonstration.

For a Dane, the constant political correctness expected of Swedes may seem incomprehensible

Even so, Söder now holds one of Sweden's most prestigious offices. He is one of four speakers who preside over the Swedish parliament, thanks to his party's success in the elections last fall. The Sweden Democrats won 13 percent of the vote, sending the other 87 percent into a state of shock.

Who would have thought it of a party with neo-Nazi and racist skinhead roots – a party that until fairly recently celebrated each mandate won in small rural communities in local elections? ▷

Jan 15, 1933

▷ Sven-Olov Lindholm forms Sweden's National Socialist Workers' Party (later renamed Swedish Socialist Unity)

Photo by **Pressens bild**

Sven-Olov Lindholm, a founding father of Swedish national socialism, speaks at Östermalmstorg in Stockholm on March 9, 1947

Police break up a neo-Nazi attack on an anti-Nazi demonstration in a Stockholm suburb in October this year. More than 500 people had taken to the streets to protest against fascist graffiti in the neighborhood

Photo by Hampus Andersson / TT

Photo by TT

Adolf Hitler and his deputy, Martin Bormann, with Norway's Vidkun Quisling

May 13, 1933
Vidkun Quisling, former Norwegian secretary of defense, founds Nasjonal Samling

Oct 24, 1945
Quisling sentenced to death for, among other things, treason

1972
Mogens Glistrup founds the populist Danish Progress Party and gets 16% of the vote in 1973

Photo by **Leif Nyholm/Scanpix Denmark**

Mogens Glistrup at a national congress

Photo by **Tor Richardsen / Scanpix**

Carl Ivar Hagen, leader of Norway's Progress Party

Twenty years ago, who would have guessed that populist parties with a xenophobic agenda would be the political winners in the Nordic welfare states of the early 21st century, countries that prided themselves on being of a slightly higher moral standing – a little more peaceful, a little more democratic, a little more decent, a little more open-minded and tolerant than anyone else?

The Scandinavian debate on nationalism often becomes inflamed

How to explain that the Progress Party is in government in Norway, that the Danish People's Party is, according to many analysts, changing the political climate in Denmark, that the Finns Party (previously the True Finns Party) won 12 percent of the vote in the EU elections in May this year, and that only the left-wing Social Democrats and the conservative Moderates are bigger than the Sweden Democrats in Sweden? In this fall's parliamentary elections, not only did the Sweden Democrats do well in traditionally poor districts, but they also started to break into affluent areas such as Fridhem in Malmö, a wealthy seaside enclave of stately upper-class villas. That's where Zlatan Ibrahimovic has his house.

Brown shirts and swastikas – the Nazism that we recognize from the 1930s – have never gone down well with the Nordic countries. Not even in the years when Hitler ruled Germany and much of Europe. The Nazis loved the notion of "Nordic." It was from this region that they believed they would find the most Germanic Germans. But the feeling was not unreservedly mutual.

Swedish pro-Nazi factions had their best election in 1936 when they got about 50,000 votes – under two percent of the electorate. This included more than 30,000 votes for the National League of Sweden. The NLS had previously been called the National Youth League of Sweden and was linked to the right-wing General Electoral League (now the Moderates).

The picture was similar in neighboring countries. In Denmark, Captain Cay Lembcke went from being head of the scout movement to leading the pro-Nazi Danish National Socialist Workers' Party. It was too German to be a credible Danish nationalist party and remained a marginal party even after Lembcke was succeeded by Frits Clausen, a doctor from Southern Jutland. The Danish Nazis got just two percent of the vote in 1939.

In Norway in 1933, having served as defense minister in the agrarian government of Peter Kolstad, Vidkun Quisling formed the fascist-leaning Nasjonal Samling. Like its Danish counterpart, the party got a lukewarm response from voters. The Danish and Norwegian Nazis' real political breakthrough came when the German occupiers gave them the chance to become traitors to their country.

Not even in Finland did an outright Nazi party

Oct 18, 1974
Anders Lange dies. His successor, Carl Ivar Hagen, turns the Anders Lange Party into the Norwegian Progress Party

August 1979
Keep Sweden Swedish founded. Merges with the Progress Party and changes name to the Sweden Party

Feb 6, 1988
Sweden Democrats founded. One of its leaders, Anders Klarström, was an active member of the Nordic Reich Party

Sept 15, 1991
The Swedish anti-immigrant party New Democracy wins 7% of the vote and seats in parliament

Photo by **Morten Juhl/FLT-PICA**

Pia Kjærgaard at the Danish parliament in Christiansborg

Oct 6, 1995
Pia Kjærgaard leaves the Progress Party and founds the Danish People's Party

manage to become a dominant force, despite favorable conditions. Finland had just come through a brutal civil war, bordered Stalin's Soviet Union, and fought on Germany's side in the Continuation War of 1941-44.

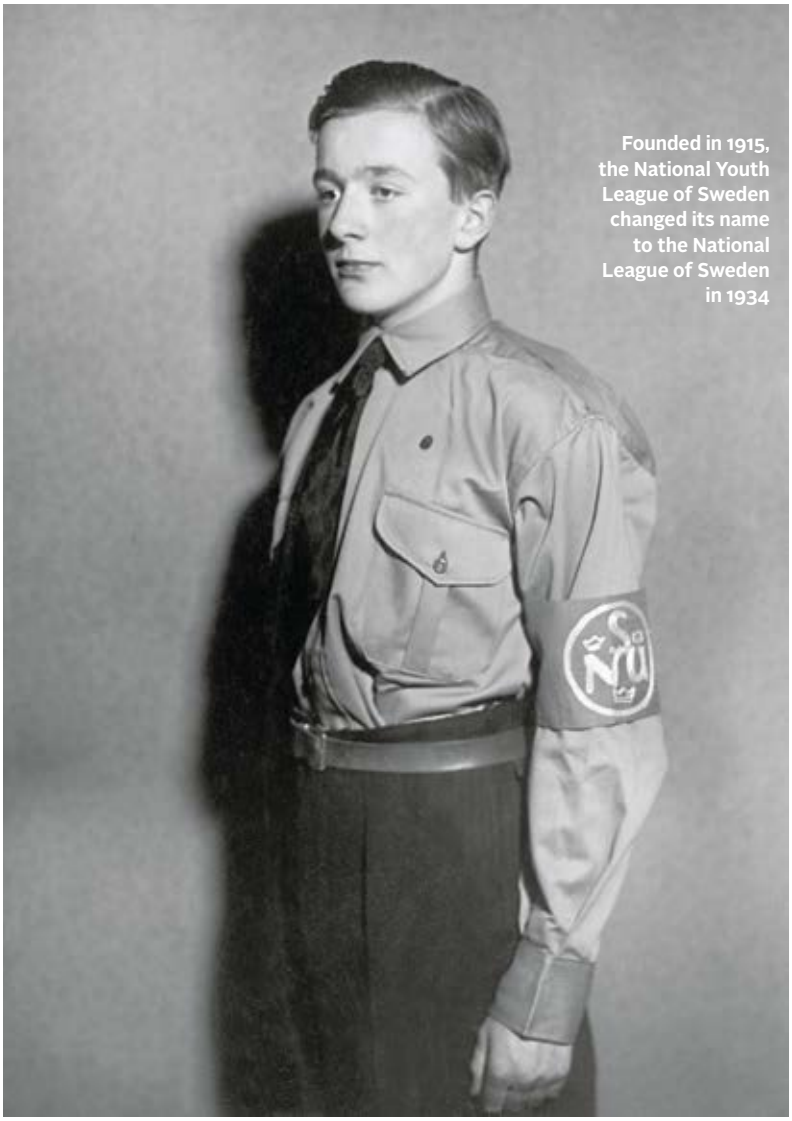
During the 1930s, the Patriotic People's Movement grew out of the anticommunist Lapua Movement, with the typical fascist penchant for uniforms. In the 1936 election, the party won over eight percent of the vote and enjoyed a ministerial post during the war years. It never held power, however.

Despite the lack of electoral success, fascism and Nazism did influence Nordic society during the interwar period. Influence measured by election results is not the same as the power to influence the social climate.

In the 1930s, fascist ideas were widely discussed, and often accepted, in social circles that could influence which questions were asked and which answers were given in political debates – namely by academics, intellectuals, and students.

In Finland, several young writers and authors were part of the unofficially named "Black Guard." In Norway, the country's greatest poet, Knut Hamsun, was an articulate pro-Nazi. While in Denmark the youth faction of the Conservative People's Party formed a nationalist action league in 1933 with a uniform comprising green shirts and riding boots.

And what about Sweden? The chairman of the National League of Sweden, Elmo Lindholm, was a lecturer in Latin which is not as strange as it sounds for a fascist leader at that time.



Founded in 1915, the National Youth League of Sweden changed its name to the National League of Sweden in 1934

Photo by **Scanpix**

Dressed in student caps and carrying torches, between 400 and 500 students marched through central Stockholm on February 6, 1939. It was just a few months after Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass, and the students were protesting against an idea proposed by some Swedish doctors to give a dozen Jewish German doctors the right to live and work in Sweden. "Stop the import of Jews," was written on one banner and "Sweden for the Swedes" on another.

At a public meeting in connection with the torch-lit procession, representatives of the student unions for aspiring dentists, pharmacists, and doctors spoke out. The rally was organized by the Swedish National Socialist Student Union.

In other words, the Nazi student organization.

In the weeks that followed, the Medical Students' Association in Stockholm and the student unions of Uppsala and Lund held meetings on the same topic. Everywhere, anti-refugee resolutions were passed by considerable majorities. The Swedish Nazis were overjoyed.

On February 25, 1939, a report from the student ▷

Photo by **Bax Lindhardt/Scanpix Denmark**

Flash point: Supporters of neo-Nazi party the National Socialist Movement of Denmark clash with left-wing protesters at a Racism Free City demo in Christiansborg Palace Square, Copenhagen, on May 10. Police made several arrests

The Norwegian Progress Party held its general meeting in Gardermoen in 2007

Photo by **Knut Falch/TT**

2001
Danish People's Party becomes the third-biggest party in Denmark

May 7, 2005
Jimmie Åkesson becomes leader of the Sweden Democrats

union meeting in Uppsala headed the front page of the Swedish paper *Den Svenske Folksocialisten* ("The Swedish People Socialist"): "Uppsala students safeguard the nation's borders/Firm protest against the import of refugees."

The newspaper was the organ of the so-called Lindholm Movement or National Socialist Workers' Party. Its leader was a noncommissioned army officer called Sven-Olov Lindholm. In 1938, his party changed its name to the Swedish Socialist Unity, and replaced the swastika with a blue and yellow symbol, the so-called "Vasa sheaf."

Despite modest election results, Lindholm's party had the wind in its sails in the 1930s and saw itself as the young vanguard of new Europe.

Fascism reigned supreme in two of Europe's leading cultural nations – Italy and Germany – and was the worldview on the rise in a number of countries. The fascists saw themselves as warriors of destiny, in which one's nation, one's people, and the future of one's "race" was at stake.

There were three enemies: Marxism (which included social democracy), liberalism/big business, and the Jews, who were considered to be behind both Marxism and capitalism. These "forces of evil" fueled their sinister games with the help of democracy, a concept rewritten as "dumbocracy" in Swedish Nazi circles.

This worldview attracted a not inconsiderable number of students in the 1930s who, after the war, went on to take up important positions in Swedish society: high school teachers, doctors, senior civil servants, politicians, judges, priests, and editors.

That may also be one reason why there was never any profound soul-searching in Sweden after World War II.

The Holocaust is the great watershed moment in modern European history. In its wake, Nazism could only survive publicly as mold on the walls of the basement of politics, a pathetic cult of unrepentant old men and intoxicated young rebels.

In this respect, the difference between the Nordic countries is small. Those who saluted Nazism posed no threat to society.

Yet in one important aspect they differ considerably. While Sweden allowed the modern social structure to become the major – and only – source of national pride after the war, labeling historical romance and patriotic pomp as suspicious and ▷

Media spotlight: Jimmie Åkesson, leader of the Sweden Democrats, is quizzed by the press on election night

Photo by **Lars Pehrson / SvD / TT**

Sept 19, 2010
The Sweden Democrats win 6% of the vote and seats in parliament

Oct 16, 2013
In Norway, the Conservatives and Progress Party form a minority government. Siv Jensen made secretary of finance

Sept 14, 2014
The Sweden Democrats become Sweden's third-biggest party

dangerous phenomena, countries that had been occupied or directly involved in the war had a different relationship to nationalism. There, national symbols were charged with positive energy in the struggle for freedom and independence.

That's why the Scandinavian debate on nationalism often becomes so inflamed.

For a Swede, it is bizarre to see Danes waving small paper flags in the arrivals hall at Kastrup airport, and then there's the Danish political debate and its fixation on "foreigners."

For a Dane, the constant political correctness expected of Swedes – to the extent that other parties refuse to speak to the Sweden Democrats – may seem incomprehensible.

Many Swedes in the meantime may find it strange that the Progress Party resumed a central role in Norwegian political life so quickly, and seemingly easily, after the massacre on Utøya. While, for their part, Norwegians may feel that Swedes who constantly highlight mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik's former membership of the Progress Party aren't slandering just the party, but to some extent Norway as a nation.

Nordic quarrels can be explained by parties' different evolutions

Nordic quarrels can be explained by parties' different evolutions. The Sweden Democrats have grown out of Keep Sweden Swedish, a racist organization that emerged in the 1980s. The Finns Party can be said to have its roots in old-fashioned peasant populism and the 1970s Rural Party. And Pia Kjærsgaard, the woman behind the Danish People's Party, was nurtured politically by the marzipan-loving, tax-hating populist Mogens Glistrup and his Progress Party of the early 1970s.

The architect of the Norwegian Progress Party, Anders Lange, shamelessly named it the Anders Lange Party. A few years after his death in 1974, the party was taken over by Carl Ivar Hagen and became the Progress Party.

Both Glistrup and Lange's parties were traditional protest parties in that they wanted to cause trouble for a welfare state that many in the 1970s thought had grown too big, too bold, and too self-sufficient. It wasn't until the 1990s that a Swedish equivalent, the New Democracy, was founded. By then, discontent with the political establishment had been mixed with a sizable dose of xenophobia increasingly directed at Muslim groups.

It is this witches' brew that the populist and far-right parties of Europe are now successfully plying their voters with. It is no longer the fear of an excessively strong welfare state, but a nostalgic longing for the omnipotent nation state of old, that these parties are exploiting.

Consequently, regardless of their inherent differences and nuances, the parties are pushing an ideology more similar to that of the 1930s than the 1970s. This is true of the Danish People's Party and the Finns Party, and it's especially true of the Sweden Democrats. The society they want to re-establish is completely different to the one we live in.

"We simply don't want the divided, segregated, soulless society that the socialist-liberal establishment has created for us," Jimmie Åkesson, leader of the Sweden Democrats, writes at the end of his political memoir *Satis Polito*.

His far-right counterparts throughout Europe are all certainly nodding in agreement. Today's brand of extreme nationalism may take different forms, but its enemies are the same: the EU, the liberal media, and globalized society.

Perhaps because nationalism is so natural in homogeneous Scandinavia we haven't paid attention to it, and that's why it's easier than we could have ever imagined to convince large sections of the population that all threats are external.

In a world of change, there are those that pretend that the clock can be turned back and that society can once again be the safe and harmonious family it never was. ○